



UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

**EXISTENTIALISM IN FOUR MALAYSIAN ANGLOPHONE WRITERS:
K.S. MANIAM, LLYOD FERNANDO, KEE THUAN CHYE
AND SALLEH BEN JONED**

KRISHNAWENI RAJOO

FBMK 2001 7

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By

KRISHNAWENI RAJOO

**Thesis Submitted in Fulfilment of the Requirement
for the Degree of Master of Arts in the
Faculty of Modern Languages
Universiti Putra Malaysia**

April 2001



To the memory of my
late parents: Mr. Rajoo Vengadaslame (1921–1999),
who had made possible for me the dream of a wider
world, and Mdm. Rukumani Thangaveloo (1932–1999),
who had made my very existence a reality.

Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in
fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

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SALLEH BEN JONED**

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April 2001

Chairman: Associate Professor M.A.Quayum, Ph.D.

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The intention of this research is to highlight existential features in four Malaysian writers in English: K.S. Maniam (Indian), Lloyd Fernando (Eurasian), Kee Thuan Chye (Chinese) and Salleh Ben Joned (Malay). These writers delineate existentialism in their works in radically different levels of intensity and depth. They fall in a receding slope in their portrayal of existentialism from the first writer, Maniam, to Fernando, Kee and lastly, Salleh. Apart from that, the writers also portray existential sub-themes (or recurring themes) in an irregular manner, based on the times they wrote a particular book, their characterisations, plot, and even their own personal disposition. The writers may also portray this philosophy in their works in either a conscious or unconscious manner. Though existential elements are prevalent in the writings of all four writers (the novels of Maniam and Fernando, Kee's dramas and Salleh's newspaper articles and poems), yet, this philosophy seems to be subscribed to and used by these four writers in diverse ways.

Abstrak tesis yang di kemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan Ijazah Master Sastera

**EKSISTENTIALISMA DALAM EMPAT ORANG PENULIS MALAYSIA
DALAM BAHASA INGGERIS: K.S. MANIAM, LLYOD FERNANDO,
KEE THUAN CHYE DAN SALLEH BEN JONED**

Oleh

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Pengerusi: Profesor Madya M.A.Quayum, Ph.D.

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Tujuan penyiasatan ini adalah untuk mendedahkan ciri-ciri eksistentialisma dalam empat orang penulis Malaysia dalam Bahasa Inggeris. Penulis-penulis yang dipilih, K.S. Maniam (India), Lloyd Fernando (Serani), Kee Thuan Chye (Cina) dan Salleh Ben Joned (Melayu), sememangnya mengajukan eksistentialisma di dalam penulisan mereka, tetapi keyakinan, tahap, kesungguhan, keluasan dan perspektif eksistentialisma yang di paparkan oleh mereka adalah berbeza. Eksistentialisma ditunjukkan oleh penulis-penulis yang di pilih dalam kecenderongan yang berkurangan, dari penulis pertama Maniam, kepada Fernando, Kee dan akhirnya, Salleh. Selain dari itu, penulis-penulis ini juga menunjukkan tema-tema sampingan (atau tema-tema berulang) eksistentialisma dalam penulisan mereka secara tidak menentu, kerana ianya berdasarkan kepada waktu penulisan mereka, watak-watak, perjalanan cerita, dan juga bergantung

kepada personaliti penulis sendiri. Penulis-penulis ini juga mengutarakan falsafah eksistentialisma dalam penulisan mereka, sama ada secara sedar atau tidak sedar. Walaupun kesemua empat penulis memaparkan ciri-ciri eksistentialisma dalam penulisan mereka (dalam novel-novel Maniam dan Fernando, drama-drama Kee, dan artikel akhbar serta puisi Salleh), tetapi, cara falsafah ini dikemukakan dan dipaparkan oleh keempat-empat penulis yang dipilih, adalah kesemuanya berbeza.

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I certify that an examination committee met on the 3rd of April 2001 to conduct the final examination of R.Krishnaweni a/p V.Rajoo on her Master of Arts thesis entitled "Existentialism in Four Malaysian Anglophone Writers: K.S.Maniam, Llyod Fernando, Kee Thuan Chye and Salleh Ben Jones" in accordance with Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (Higher Degree) Act 1980 and Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (Higher Degree) Regulations 1981. The committee recommends that the candidate be awarded the relevant degree. Members of the Examination Committee are as follows:

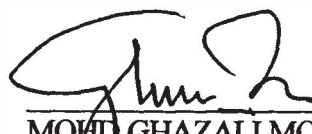
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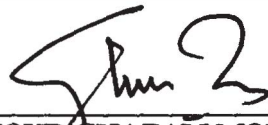
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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the thesis is based on my original work except for quotations and citations, which have been duly acknowledged. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted for any other degree at UPM or other institutions.



R. Krishnaweni a/p V. Rajoo

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This research intends to analyse selected works by Malaysian writers in English for existential elements. Four writers from different ethnic groups will be analysed in the order of K.S. Maniam (Indian), Lloyd Fernando (Eurasian), Kee Thuan Chye (Chinese), and Salleh Ben Joned (Malay). I have placed these writers in the order I expect the existential elements found in them to decrease. Existentialism has been prominent in countries which have had a turbulent history due to factors like invasion, revolution or war - for example, France. Such massive upheavals caused a revamp in the politics, economy and even morality of these nations.

Malaysia may be taken as one such nation, affected by its turbulent history. This is because since the invasion of Malacca by the Portuguese in 1511, this nation has had to contend with both external and internal factors, which have played a role towards moulding its destiny. To quote Asmah Haji Omar, "The Portuguese rule in Melaka lasted over a century. In 1641, Malacca fell into the hands of the Dutch. At the end of the Napoleonic war, which was concluded with the signing of the treaty of 1824, Malacca was ceded over to the British by the Dutch" (23). In addition, Malaysia consists of a plural society, which had faced racial tensions (for instance, the racial riots of May 13, 1969) and rapid technological advancement. Therefore, both external (e.g. colonialism) and internal (racial tensions and technological advancement) factors have contributed towards the formation of unique systems and values in multi-ethnic Malaysia.

Thereby, it can be deduced that the literary consciousness of Malaysian writers have been moulded by these external and internal exigencies. These factors have brought on a unique disposition in the Malaysian individual, some of which may be related to existentialism, for example, alienation, depersonalisation, displacement, and anxiety. These seem to be especially apparent in the immigrant communities, though different factors of existentialism do affect the indigenous people as well.

There is substantial truth in Wan Hashim's statement in the introduction to his work, *Race Relations in Malaysia*, that racial tension is a phenomenon in all post-colonial countries. He adds that the prevailing circumstance in the country has caused inequality and competition among the races, resulting in what can be categorised as *angst* (an acute sense of anxiety and fear) and sense of futility (or meaninglessness) in some individuals. Ross-Larson suggests that the tendency in present day Malaysia is to treat interpersonal dealings in an impersonal way (34). This is because of the rapid modernisation that has occurred in the nation, causing a break-up in the traditional social system of Malaysia (32). Ross-Larson's opinion is that such changes in relationships are unavoidable in the rapidly industrialising and progressing Malaysia. However, this trend seems to signal the dehumanisation (loss of human qualities) and depersonalisation (loss of a person's natural personality) of individuals in modern Malaysia. Apart from that, economic, political and socio-cultural imbalance have added force to the central issue of tension. In this study, I will investigate the presence of existential elements in four Malaysian writers in English, arising from the many-fold tensions in national life.

Problem Statement

The purpose of this study is to examine the different existential themes in the works of four Malaysian writers in English and the reasons they perceive and depict the themes in individual ways. For example, the depiction of the theme of dignity might vary when it is viewed by an author in the inter-racial or intra-racial context. In this study, K.S. Maniam looks at both perspectives, while Kee Thuan Chye concentrates on the inter-racial aspects of dignity. Moreover, the writers I have selected may portray existential tendencies consciously (through their study of the existential philosophy), or unconsciously (due to historical, social, and personal circumstances). Therefore, I expect to analyse the depth and spontaneity of the various author's depiction of existentialism which will tend to vary considerably.

Scope of Study

I wish to include the writings by the aforementioned authors, most pertinent to existentialism in this study. The genre included will vary greatly as it will incorporate fiction (novels), drama, non-fiction (which are newspaper articles) and poems. All in all, I will study for existential themes, two novels each by K.S. Maniam and Llyod Fernando, two of Kee Thuan Chye's plays, and a volume of non-fictional essays and some poems by Salleh Ben Joned.

The existential philosophy can be broadly divided into two main categories: religious existentialism, which condones a belief in God, and secular existentialism, which does not. Religious existentialism was propounded by Soren Kierkegaard

(1813–1855), and it has influenced both the contemporary Catholic and Protestant beliefs. For Kierkegaard, religion should be the fundamental centre of one's existence and not be merely a secular organisation, as it is taken to be in the modern world. Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) too has been a great influence upon the 20th century Christian existential proponents, one example being Tillich (1886–1965). Christian theologians study the existential philosophy as a means to anchor more deeply their faith in the religious belief. In addition, they seem to be influenced by Heidegger's concept that, "To live authentically means the frank acceptance of the fact that human existence is an existence orientated-towards-death" (Charlesworth 66). This concept of Heidegger is somewhat similar to Sartre's concept of "man-towards-death" (which means, man exists only to achieve the final probability in this world, that of death). Moreover, existentialism has influenced the Jewish religious thought, e.g. Martin Buber [1878–1965] (Charlesworth 66).

However, the focus of existentialism for this study will be mostly on secular existentialism. The works by Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980), Albert Camus (1913–1960) and Franz Kafka (1893–1924) will be given preference as they are more relevant to the writings and literary sensibility of the four chosen Malaysian writers in English. Sartre is considered by many as the father of secular existentialism, which came into popular existence after the first and during the second World War in France, and he has also written numerous philosophical works on existentialism, which I will briefly discuss in Chapter II of this research. Sartre is looked upon as an atheist. On the other hand, Camus is an Algerian writer, who is taken to be a humanist as he is positive about man's future. Camus views humankind as social beings, while Sartre depicts the lone individual as ultimately estranged from his surroundings and as not belonging authentically to any real social circle. Kafka is an

East European writer from Czechoslovakia, who focuses on the existence and influence of external powers (be it within or without the family) as a cause of futility in an individual's endeavours.

Objective of the Study

This study intends to shed new light upon the works of four Malaysian writers in English, i.e. K.S. Maniam, Llyod Fernando, Kee Thuan Chye and Salleh Ben Joned, through an investigation of existential elements in their works. I propose to examine the existential themes these writers portray in their works and look for reasons why they seem inclined towards the existential tradition. I also seek to examine the variations in the treatment of existential themes in the works of these writers.

Significance of the Study

This research will attempt to depict the four Malaysian Anglophone writers in English as having affiliation with the existential philosophy. During the early part of the last century, the Western world was devastated by both revolutions and wars. As a result, the nations underwent drastic changes in their systems, organisations and societal values. Furthermore, industrialisation and technological advancement altered the perspectives and world views of these nations, causing the individuals to find existing systems and organisations (which were tradition bound in the past) to be meaningless in the new circumstances.

Malaysia, however, has had its own problems and tensions. Over the years, it has had sustained invasion, colonialisation, war, and racial tensions. Therefore, it

is likely that these external and internal factors have influenced the literary consciousness of Malaysian English writers. Apart from that, the language that this group of writers use can in itself be a source of alienation for them, as the English language at most enjoys the status of a distant second language in the country, with an overwhelming emphasis put on Bahasa Malaysia as the country's national language since independence. Moreover, the English Language may at times be construed in a negative light too, as it is taken as one of the legacies of colonialism.

Furthermore, the immigrant writers will tend to concern themselves with marginalisation as well as the subjugating forces of a natural process of assimilation into the majority group, even though such adjustments are seen to be inevitable in a plural society. Whereas, the native writer is expected to face fear and repulsion because of a loss of footing in his own land. This research will discuss these factors in the chosen writers in the light of existential philosophy.

Limitations of the Study

The study of existential philosophy will be limited to the secular strand, mainly to the works and sensibilities of Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Franz Kafka. This is because the themes of secular existentialism are more pertinent to the existential quality portrayed by the four chosen Malaysian writers. Kafka's prominent theme of fragmentation of the self and depersonalisation is pertinent in both K.S. Maniam and Lloyd Fernando. Camus' theme of absurdity is pertinent in K.S. Maniam, Kee Thuan Chye and Salleh Ben Joned, though it may appear to be embedded in various other themes. In K.S. Maniam, absurdity is found in his theme of reality and truth; in Kee Thuan Chye, it is found in the theme of equality, and in

Salleh Ben Joned, in the theme of dignity. Camus' concept of "humane consciousness" (of being aware of human nature and tendencies) and of being an individual in the mass society can be applied to the second works of both K.S. Maniam and Lloyd Fernando (*In a Far Country* and *Green is the Colour*, respectively). In Kee Thuan Chye's plays, Sartre's themes of equality, freedom and truth are most pertinent. Additionally, Sartre's conscience, reality and truth, seem to concern all four writers, though they may at times be found to be embedded in various other sub-themes. For example, conscience is embedded in dignity and relationship in K.S. Maniam's works. One crucial existentialism theme in Sartre, i.e. alienation, is portrayed by both Maniam and Fernando.

Conceptual Theory

The authors from the immigrant communities are expected to portray a higher degree of existentialism. These writers represent the population groups which have their expectations the least met within the spheres of socio-economy, politics and culture. Hence, they will tend to portray existentialism to a more complete level. Furthermore, the themes pertinent for each writer is expected to vary in accordance to his (as well as his community's) position in the nation.

Therefore, the Malaysian Indian writer is expected to portray the highest level of existentialism. He would be involved with diverse themes, the most prominent being alienation, depersonalisation, God and life. This tendency may be attributed to the extent of socio-economic and cultural dislocation of the community. Next in this stratification would be the Eurasian writer who belongs to a displaced

community, not belonging to either the Western or the Eastern world. He will thus be guilt-ridden and face the absurd world of rootlessness with an acute sense of alienation. Next, the Chinese writer will portray existentialism in the manner of a misunderstood and estranged individual due to his differing cultural values. His individualistic traits will yearn for equality, justice and dignity of the self, especially in the political and socio-cultural realm. Lastly, the Malay writer will depict existential tendencies by wanting to be a distinct individual, and by rebelling against the political and socio-cultural structure of the nation as a means to derive dignity, truth and reality.

One possible hypothesis for this work is that the existential themes relevant for the four writers from the different races would be different. Even if similar themes do apply concurrently for the four ethnic groups, yet the perspective of the themes may differ. In explanation, the theme of dignity will be looked at by the Indian writer from the point of view of social inhibitions; the Malay writer, however, would depict dignity from the aspect of courage and pride. The second hypothesis would be that the existential themes will be found in the writers' various works in a diffused manner. For instance, a single protagonist will subscribe to or reject existential tendencies (in any one theme), as his own situation varies. In addition, the author may portray existential tendencies in his various works to differing levels of depth and intensity, as he himself has been subjugated to differing existential elements in the passage of time. Both hypotheses would be discussed and verified in the concluding chapter of this thesis.

Methodology

This work will be divided into seven chapters. The first chapter provides an introduction for the proposed research. It includes the following segments: Introduction, Problem Statement, Scope of Study, Objective, Significance of Study, Limitations of the Study, Conceptual Theory and Methodology.

The second chapter will be divided into two sections. In the first section, I propose to provide an extended survey of existentialism and in the second, a discussion of the secondary sources on the related writers. The section on existentialism will attempt to posit this trend of thought by analysing what existentialism is, its historical origins, when it may occur (related to both internal and external factors acting upon the individual), its position as a philosophy, the main proponents, some critics, as well as existentialism's link to other branches of study (i.e. psychiatry, education, literature, theology and politics). Following this, the recurring themes of existentialism will be analysed individually or as they are linked together, either in concurring or opposing ways. These themes will include alienation, freedom, reality, truth, dignity, routine, time, void, man-towards-being, the individual and society, religion, anxiety/anguish, death, life, rootlessness/displacement, transience, existentialism in women, existentialism in politics, relationships, equality, dehumanisation/ depersonalisation/fragmentation, guilt, conscience, consciousness, morality and history.

The next section in Chapter 2 will provide a review of literature by critics as they are pertinent to existentialism in Malaysian writers. After discussing these critical comments generally, a study will be made separately of the comments available for K.S. Maniam, Llyod Fernando, Kee Thuan Chye, and Salleh Ben

Joned. For lack of substantial direct comments on the selected Malay writer, a general critique on Malaysian Malay writers will also be used to depict the existential qualities in the Malay ethnic group. This section will also attempt to include, wherever it is available, the writers' own perception of their work.

As I have mentioned earlier, chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6 will respectively deal with the four writers: K.S. Maniam, Llyod Fernando, Kee Thuan Chye and Salleh Ben Joned. Chapters 3 and 4 will look at two novels each by subdividing the chapter into the available existential themes. Chapter 3 will investigate K.S. Maniam's *The Return* and *In A Far Country*, and Chapter 4 will deal with Lloyd Fernando's *Scorpion Orchid* and *Green is the Colour*. The same will be done in Chapter 5, but this time the focus will be simultaneously on the two plays of Kee Thuan Chye, *1984: Here and Now* and *We Could XXXX You Mr. Birch*. Chapter 6 will analyse the newspaper articles by Salleh Ben Joned, collected by the author in *As I Please* as well as some of his poems from *Poems: Sacred and Profane*. In this chapter, as in others, I wish to discuss the existential themes portrayed by the writer by subdividing the chapter into the available existential themes in the writer's works.

The last chapter will be the conclusion, which will include an analysis of the possible hypotheses mentioned in the introduction. The four writers who will be discussed independently from chapters three to six will be compared and contrasted in their portrayal and application of the various existential sub-themes. Then the differing themes these writers have chosen to depict in their works as well as the depth and intensity of their portrayal would be investigated. The man-made organisations that effect existentialism in these writers will be highlighted. An attempt will also be made to ascertain if these writers portray existentialism in their

works consciously (intended and purposeful) or unconsciously (due to the force exerted on the individual by external factors).

A last note for methodology is my explanation for the disparity in the number of pages for each chapter. Since K.S. Maniam covers a great number of themes in his books, the chapter which discusses him will contain the most number of pages. In addition, when the first two writers' works are novels, the third writer, Kee Thuan Chye's works which will be analysed are plays. Kee's comments on existentialism via his plays, do not take as much space as do the discussions of novels. This is because Kee's investigations are limited to the intra-racial realm and his characters seem to be more of thinking subjects, complete with self-awareness. His characters are not as oppressed as those of K.S. Maniam, as Kee belongs to a more affluent class in society. Finally, the two works of the last writer, Salleh Ben Joned, will be discussed. They are a collection of newspaper articles and a collection of poems. Salleh also belongs to a more affluent class of society and furthermore he is a member of the majority group, unlike the three earlier writers. Therefore, the chapter which investigates Salleh is also relatively shorter than the earlier chapters as he is concerned with fewer existential themes, the same as Kee. In this way, it is apparent that both ethnic and class distinctions seem to influence the level of existentialism in the four chosen writers.